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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Sociologists for Women in Society, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Sociologists for Women in Society is a non-profit scientific and educational organization of sociologists dedicated to improving women's lives and creating feminist social change. We gained consultative status with the Economic and Social Council in 1999 following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Rural women make up a significant portion of the world's low-income population and we applaud the attention paid to them and their role in development by the Commission on the Status of Women. In preparation for its fifty-sixth session, we convened a panel in August 2011 on rural women, poverty, hunger and development: feminist sociological insight. Several expert sociologists, including Kum-Kum Bhavnani, Mangala Subramaniam, Yordanos Tiruneh and Catherine Meola, offered ideas based on their extensive research to assist the Commission in its focus on rural women's role in development. The panellists emphasized the following points for Member States to consider:

Put women at the centre of development as active agents of social transformation. Development is not simply growth in gross domestic product. Economic growth alone does not alleviate poverty. A better approach to development is to conceptualize it as "planned social transformation" that puts women at the centre. Women are not passive recipients of development but are active agents of social transformation. For successful development, women and others at the foundation of society must be included in the development planning process. Development is most sustainable when demand is generated from within, by the intended recipients, the best source to define priorities. In assessing development efforts, women's long hours of reproductive labour, as they feed and care for their families, must be viewed as a critical part of community development rather than women's private responsibility.

Community grass-roots groups are the most effective way to involve women in planned social transformation. Community grass-roots groups mobilize and empower rural women, giving them the confidence and skills to engage in the political process. They create solidarity among women and empower them to speak up to the authorities. Community grass-roots groups convey critical information to rural women and allow local female leaders to emerge. Women organized into community grass-roots groups are effective advocates for development. Despite their proven success, there are few women's community grass-roots groups in rural areas. A significant increase in women's community grass-roots groups can empower rural women and accelerate social transformation.

Literacy is the most significant challenge confronting rural women. Women's low educational achievement contributes to the problem of poverty. Adult literacy is much lower for rural women than for urban women. Even among rural women, literacy varies dramatically along class, caste, ethnic and religious lines. For instance, in the Indian State of Karnataka, the national literacy rate for women is relatively high. But when those rates are disaggregated by caste at the district level, literacy rates for rural low-caste women are much lower than the national rates. These differences have implications for access to resources and the degree of power exercised within the family and community. Poorly educated women have limited access to resources, such as land, markets and credit. They are vulnerable to violence, trafficking and HIV infection, a "feminine epidemic" in many areas. Low

enrolment of rural girls in school perpetuates poverty and vulnerability in the next generation.

Literacy projects bring rural women together and foster community grass-roots groups. When rural women acquire literacy, they have new opportunities for paid employment and the means to contribute more effectively to their family circumstances. Through adult literacy projects, rural women learn vital information about HIV that empowers them to protect themselves against infection. Literacy projects bring women together and give them the confidence to organize against violence. Women's community grass-roots groups created through literacy projects provide the means for women to support one another as they address community and family needs. Scheduling for adult literacy projects should take place in consultation with women's community grass-roots groups in order to allow rural women to balance their wage work, housework and literacy classes.

Educated rural women can provide community grass-roots groups with the leadership needed for community transformation. Educated women empowered by community grass-roots groups are more likely to fill leadership roles and work for community improvement rather than merely individual advancement. Educated women organized into community grass-roots groups can press for the enforcement of laws protecting women such as those against domestic violence and early marriage. They can advocate for girls' education, adult literacy classes, access to clean water, improved sanitation and greater access to primary health care. Educated rural women leaders can transform women's and girls' lives at the grass-roots level and bring about effective community social transformation.

Sociologists for Women in Society calls upon the States Members of the United Nations to intensify the focus of development efforts on literacy projects, community grass-roots groups and rural women's leadership. We urge policymakers to pay special attention to differences among women by class, caste, ethnicity and religion and to develop programmes targeting specific groups of women. Such targeted development efforts will empower all categories of rural women and produce successful, long-lasting social transformation.